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ABSTRACT

In an effort to improve the management of the Georgia Department of Education innovation program, a concept paper process for selecting developmental projects was implemented in January of 1989. The first effort, in January of 1989, yielded 48 papers; the second effort, in November of 1990, yielded 56 papers. For the Novemeber effort, funding was provided for seven of the 56 projects proposed: two were urban projects, and five were rural projects. Rural schools more frequently submitted concept papers than urban schools: 47 of the 56 papers were from rural schools. Before inception of the concept paper, urban schools submitted the majority of the funded proposals. Once a concept proposal is accepted, the full plan is developed with planning resource assistance. Resources include consultants in project organization, program content, and evaluation. Concept papers must respond to one or more of the statewide priorities established each year by the State Strategic Planning Committee. Concept papers, which can be no longer than five pages, are based on seven essential elements and are reviewed, based on 11 criteria, by a four-member panel. Compared to the previous proposal review process, the concept paper approach has resulted in more projects being funded. Problems of interrater reliability across panel reviewers are addressed. One table is included. (TJH)

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A STATE LEVEL MODEL FOR EDUCATIONAL IMPROVEMENT
"Using the Concept Paper Approach for Developmental Projects"

by

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Georgia Department of Education

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A STATE LEVEL MODEL FOR EDUCATIONAL IMPROVEMENT
"Using the Concept Paper Approach for
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Georgia Dept. of Education

The Georgia Department of Education sponsors an innovation program under Section 20-2-250 of the Quality Basic Education Act of 1985 that awards grants to help local school systems develop, implement and evaluate their creative ideas. Successful efforts with demonstrated effectiveness are then spread statewide to other school systems.

In an effort to constantly improve the management of the Innovation Program, a new process for selecting developmental projects was implemented two years ago. In the early part of the past five years the initial application for a developmental project has been a comprehensive proposal that was very technical in nature. Some proposals with good ideas would not be selected because the technical components of the proposal were deficient. In addition, the review of the technical components of the proposal many times did not provide for the full embellishment of the quality of a good idea. Further, a lot of staff time at the local system level is required to write a developmental proposal. Urban school systems many times have professional grant writers on the staff. This gives them an advantage over small rural systems in competitive applications. In the first three years of the program, urban and metro school systems submitted the majority of the funded proposals. During the first use of the concept paper approach in January 1989, the Department received 48 concept papers and 40 of these concept papers were submitted by rural school systems. Seven papers were selected for funding, one was metro, three were small urban, and three were rural. During the second use of this approach in November of 1989, the Department received 56 concept papers and 47 of these were submitted by rural school systems. Seven papers were selected for funding, two were urban/metro and five were rural. The concept paper approach focuses on the quality of the concept or good idea and it is brief in length. The full comprehensive project plan (proposal) is developed with planning resource assistance. These resources include consultants with the expertise in project organization, program content, and evaluation necessary for this in-depth development.

A specific set of procedures is used with the concept paper approach. Annually four to six statewide priorities for improvement will be determined by the State Strategic Planning Committee. These are then approved by the Georgia Board of Education. An announcement of the priorities and the request for "concept papers" is sent to all local school systems in the state. The process for writing a concept paper is simple and specific. Concept papers can be no longer than five pages typed double-spaced. They should include the following elements:

(a) Evidence documenting that the state priority to be addressed by the proposed program focuses on a need or problem in your school system;
(b) A general description of your approach to solving the problem identified in the priority;
(c) A list of the specific components included in your approach to the problem;

(d) A description of the characteristics of your school system (small, rural, urban, etc.) and the proposed group that will receive the intervention (at-risk students, elementary students, remedial classes, etc.);
(e) The specific expected outcomes of the program;
(f) How you intend to evaluate the success and effectiveness of the intervention; and
(g) An explanation of how the project could be adopted by other Georgia school systems at a reasonable cost.

The review, rating and selection of the concept papers to receive funding is a very organized and precise process. Concept papers are categorized by priority for rating by a review team. The review team is composed of three to five members from the Innovation Program Review Panel and a content and an evaluation expert (university staff). The content expert and the evaluation expert utilize criteria that address the depth and feasibility of the concept. These team members write a specific narrative evaluation of each concept paper. The criteria used are:

(a) Is there a logical link between the proposed activities and the expected outcomes?
(b) Is this link supported by research evidence?
(c) Is there evidence that expected outcomes can be produced by the proposed activities?
(d) Is there evidence that the proposed activity is based on sound or other appropriate learning theory from the literature?
(e) Is there evidence that the proposal reflects a good understanding of the underlying learning theory?
(f) Is there evidence that the proposal reflects a good understanding of the psychological basis of the expected outcomes?
(g) Is there evidence that these outcomes can be validly measured?
(h) Is there evidence that these outcomes can be validly measured at the level of expected change?
(i) Is there a good match between the school and community environment and what is known about the effectiveness of the planned activities?
(j) Is there a good match between the school population (teachers and pupils) and what is known about the planned activities?
(k) Based on the total concept proposal, is there a high probability that the proposed activities will be effective?

Based on the ratings of this review team, up to three concept papers for each priority are selected for final evaluation by a selection review panel. This review panel is composed of two members of the Innovation Program review panel who rated the concept paper during the first rating, a staff member from the Innovation Program, the content expert, and the evaluation expert for effectiveness. Each applicant is given 15 minutes to make a presentation of their concept approach to this review panel. The panel then has 15 minutes to ask the applicant questions concerning this concept approach. The review panel then has 15 minutes to discuss this concept among themselves and arrive at an overall rating for this application. Based on these overall ratings, one or more concept papers for each priority are considered for further development with planning resources. This planning resource assistance provides the necessary resources and expertise (consultants, travel, communications) needed to assist the local staff in developing the project plan.

Concept papers selected for funding then move to the planning resource phase. This planning resource assistance provides the vehicle to obtain the expert human resources necessary to help school systems develop comprehensive plans for their projects. Representatives of the Georgia Department of Education provide technical assistance during the planning period. Expert consultants in project organization, in the content area and in evaluation work with local system staff members to develop the comprehensive project plan. It is reviewed against the developmental project criteria. If approved, the project would then be considered for a full year of developmental project funding. After the planning period, Innovation Program staff members review the developmental project plan and, if it is acceptable, recommend that the Georgia Board of Education fund the project. Funding for innovation projects is granted on a year-by-year basis. If an on-site review at the conclusion of the first year indicates that the project merits continued funding, the grant is continued for a second year of development. At the end of the developmental period, a team of state validators will visit the site of the project to conduct a thorough review to determine the effectiveness of the project. After validation, a project is moved to a training center to disseminate the validated practice to other Georgia school systems.

A major component to be developed during the planning phase is the evaluation design. This comprehensive design should be developed for the entire project period through the state validation process. It is most important that the evaluation process be developed and in place prior to the start of activities for the first full developmental year. The effectiveness of the project is the key factor in the validation process and the evaluation design is the tool by which the effectiveness of the project is demonstrated.

Under the original proposal application approach, eight developmental projects over the last four years were funded, five have been state validated, one is still in the developmental phase, and two were not refunded. Under the concept paper approach, seven were funded for the first developmental year in August and September of 1989 and the second set of seven were funded in June of 1990. Eight new concept papers were selected in November of 1990 for planning resource assistance. These should be ready for the first year of developmental funding in May of 1991.

An evaluation of this concept paper approach has found that:

(a) the scope of the project plan is more comprehensive, organized and precise;
(b) the local school system staff have an in-depth understanding of the functions to be carried out during the developmental phase and realize their own limitations as well as the need for expert consultant resources in the content and evaluation area;
(c) the planning process augments initial development and most projects will be ready for state validation in two years rather than the three years it has taken in the past; and
(d) this approach coordinates the use of a management team of expert consultants from the Department of Education and the university systems to organize and shape the total project effort at its inception.

Another factor to be considered in this process is the inter-rater reliability of the readers. In terms of the announcement in September, 1990, that notified school system superintendents of the request for concept papers, the following Table A represents the results in terms of the Letters of Intent to Submit, the actual concept papers submitted and the inter-rater reliability coefficients for the readers of each of the priority areas. Five of the readers used the same instrument that had a total of 100 points. The sixth reader, the content expert, used a separate instrument that also had a total of 100 points. The score of the evaluation expert was not considered in the determination of this reliability coefficient. The data were analyzed using Crombach's Alpha Coefficent.

TABLE A

PRIORITY	LETTERS OF INTENT	PROPOSALS SUBMITTED	RELIABILITY COEFFICIENT
1	8	6	α . 8395
2	8	4	α . 8943
3	13	10	α . 8189
4	6	5	α . 5663
5	4	2	α . 8000

During the interview process, in-depth questions were asked that stimulated the thinking of the presenters. In some cases it embellished the original concept and expanded the scope of it. Most all of the presenters indicated that at the end of the interview process, they had a much broader and in-depth perspective of their concept. This approach of expanding the concept was continued at the first meeting with the management team of planning resource personnel.

All of the local system personnel participating in developing the comprehensive developmental plan have indicated the management team of resource personnel have been the greatest asset in this process. This planning has helped them shape and organize the concept into a viable, innovative project that can demonstrate effectiveness. The result of this process have provided a set of new developmental projects that are better organized and more clearly defined with precise outcome objectives and an evaluation design that focuses on the effectiveness of their outcomes.